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Running for success: Marathon boom and middle class bodies in Estonia

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Abstract

Since the turn of the millennium, the number of Estonians running at least one marathon a year has grown nearly twentyfold. This paper links the marathon boom in Estonia to novel ideas about “good life” among a subset of the country’s middle class, also situating the phenomenon into the broader context of post-1991 socio-economic changes. Drawing on fifty narrative interviews with recreational runners and the content analysis of various runners’ blogs, I will pay special attention to “runners’ bodies.” Recreational marathoners consciously put their bodies at the service of their “selves” by submitting the body to regular physical strain which fits with their distinctively middle class ideals of self-discipline, motivation, diligence, and perseverance. But runners’ bodies are also “bodies for others” – they not only encapsulate but also display these ideals. Approaching runners’ bodies as “bodies for selves” and as “bodies for others,” the article makes two arguments. Firstly, a fit body as physical capital and “purposeful suffering” that long-distance running almost inevitably leads to, have recently shifted to the core of living a “good life” in case of increasingly many members of the Estonian middle class. Secondly, the “others” for middle class runners’ bodies are first and foremost the sedentary and generally overweight bodies of their own class. For a subset of the Estonian middle class, their slim and fit running body, in combination with changed consumption practices and reference groups, serves for distinguishing themselves from the generalised idea of a middle class person in today’s Estonia.

Key words

Estonia, middle class, long-distance running, fitness, lifestyle

Introduction

In recent years Estonia has experienced a veritable explosion of the popularity of recreational long-distance running. Completing a marathon has become a conventional item on many peoples' "bucket list." Marathon tourism is common, the numbers of running clubs and races are growing. Not only do more people in Estonia run, but they run increasingly more – the number of yearly multi-marathoners (i.e. those runners who complete two, five, ten, or even more marathons a year) has also grown exponentially.

Sports practices and class identity are intricately linked, as Bourdieu has famously demonstrated.¹ This paper approaches the Estonian marathon boom as a window into studying the changing ideas about "good life" and the role of one's fit and trained body in achieving this among the predominantly middle-aged and middle class runners who constitute the engine of the boom. The argument of the paper develops from the way these runners perceive their "running bodies" simultaneously as "bodies for selves" and as "bodies for others." The two perceptions are intertwined, overlapping, and mutually reinforcing. "Bodies for selves" is an idiom that stands for taking control of one's own body, subjecting it to regular physical strain, and cultivating an ability to withstand pain and suffering that dedicated runners come to regard as meaningful and productive experiences. "Bodies for others" encapsulates the idea of bodily capital as a source of distinction and pride.

As Crăciun and Lipan suggest in the introduction to this *EEPS* special issue, in the late socialist decades, disappointments with the promised but not really delivered material prosperity had produced an imaginary of the "good life" as that being lived in the capitalist West. For the most part of the 1990s and the first decade of the 21st century, achieving "good

life” for the Estonian middle class was synonymous with the fulfilment of hitherto unsatisfied material desires. As Lauristin argues, material goods and income – hence economic capital – was the main measure of success during the first two transitional decades in Estonia, and it is only recently that material endeavours have given way to or been complemented with post-materialistic values such as education, social activism, and trust – hence social and cultural capital.² I claim that physical capital has to be added to this list and that a new understanding of what “good life” means is currently being articulated among a growing segment of the Estonian middle class. This is not to argue that all members of the middle class endeavour to shift their bodies, rendered fit through endurance running or other sports, to the core and to the fore of their aspirations for “good life,” but that increasingly many do. For most of these individuals, their fit running body comes to constitute physical capital – an embodiment of the ideals of diligence, control, independence, discipline, as well as achievement, that, according to Kocka, middle classes have traditionally had respect for.³

Through these arguments, the article contributes to a number of research contexts and discussions. Firstly, this *EEPS* special issue collectively argues that the notions of “middle class” and “good life” in Eastern Europe have become nearly synonymous. This article demonstrates, in the example of Estonia, that the understanding among the contemporary middle class of what “good life” entails is not necessarily uniform. Consequently, different segments of the population who perceive themselves as middle class may have different ways to achieve and live it. For the interlocutors in this study, a manifestly slim and fit body plays a particularly important role in this. Secondly, although the focus in anthropological research on class in Eastern Europe has gradually shifted downwards from its earlier attention to elites and the “new rich,” and although studies of Eastern European middle class(es) are now also burgeoning, a majority of the latter have been conducted from the perspective of

consumption.⁴ The main attention of this paper is on physical rather than economic capital, although this is not to underestimate the pivotal role of the increased economic security among the Estonian middle class for the emergence of non-material understandings of “good life.” And thirdly, the article inadvertently brings back to the anthropological agenda a version of the topic of the suffering subject that the so-called “happiness turn” in social sciences,⁵ also in anthropology, has endeavoured to side-line. For my middle class interlocutors, “good” pain and suffering – or, more eloquently, “purposeful” and “civilised suffering” as Atkinson and Reischer have respectively called the inevitable exhaustion from endurance sports⁶ – have evolved into productive constituents of happiness, satisfaction, and “good life.”

The discussion unfolds as follows: after a brief overview of my methods and data, and the broader contextualization of the Estonian marathon boom, I will turn my focus to “running bodies,” approaching them from the two analytical perspectives introduced above – as “bodies for selves” and as “bodies for others.” Drawing on fifty narrative interviews and the content analysis of dozens of Estonian runners’ blogs on Internet, both sections link the recreational runners’ discourse about their bodies to their broader understandings of personhood, identity, and “good life.” A theme also running through both of these sections is the middle class runners’ self-distinction – both intended and unintended – from the generalised idea of middle class in Estonia. Besides their dedication to a production of a particular kind of a body, many marathoners also mark their distinctiveness from the rest of the population via particular forms of sports-related and media consumption, (marathon) tourism, as well as via sometimes explicit identification with an international reference group of runners. The article will end with a more detailed ethnographic portrait of one of my interlocutors and his running career. Individual decisions about lifestyle happen within

structural constraints, as already Weber argued when distinguishing between life choices and life chances.⁷ As the description of Mark's running career will reveal, broader socio-economic conditions and class trends have affected how individual running careers in Estonia have evolved, as well as how, why, and when the "running body" and "purposeful suffering" have moved to the core of one's perception of "good life."

Methods and data

The discussion builds on data collected in 2014-16 which included semi-structured interviews with recreational runners, notes on runners' blogs, as well as participant observation as a runner myself during numerous marathons in Estonia.⁸ The selection of interviewees (16 female and 34 male runners) was based on purposive maximum variation sampling. The interviewees' age (from 26 to 64), the length of their running careers (from a few years to several decades) as well as their best marathon finishing times (from 2:39 to 4:13) at the time of interviewing varied considerably. The interviewees were expected to have completed at least one marathon (although most had completed considerably more – up to 128 at the time of interviewing) and be serious recreational but not elite runners.⁹

All interviewees but one were ethnic Estonians – despite a sizable Russian-speaking community in the country, their share among Estonian marathoners is to date relatively small.¹⁰ All interviewees had university education; most of them held executive, managerial, academic, or administrative positions, very few were self-made entrepreneurs. Majority of my interlocutors hence belonged to the so-called "professional middle class" or what Ehrenreich and Ehrenreich, in the US context, have called "professional-managerial class,"¹¹

even though neither of the terms has an equivalent commonly used in Estonian. Although not directly asked about the class status, numerous interviewees were explicit about their middle class identity. Such self-identification was mainly expressed in the context of talking about one's lifestyle, hobbies, and the use of free time, and less so in terms of occupation or income. This is consistent with the argument by many that lifestyle has become a primary source of social identification and perceived collective belonging, including class identity.¹²

Besides interviews I followed roughly 30 runners' blogs on Internet, all kept in Estonian, focusing particularly on how one's public self is constructed through the posted narratives and personal information. Many runners use blogs as platforms to make available for others their race reports, weekly training logs, and descriptions of injuries. Blogs are also used as sites where runners submit themselves to the panoptic gaze and as such blogs serve as instruments of self-discipline. Recurring themes in blog entries are, for example, lamenting about one's lack of being in shape and promises made to the readership to train more in the future. But blogs, as I will demonstrate below, can also be means for manifesting one's distinctive preferences for sports-related consumption, discourses, and aesthetics, as well as one's identification with an international reference group of runners.

And, lastly, I am an avid runner myself, having to date completed more than 50 marathons at home and abroad, in recent years as an observing anthropologist. Lived experience is vital for studying embodied practices such as running, although my aim here is not to produce an autoethnographic study or what Allen-Collinson in her research on long-distance running has called "autophenomenography."¹³ Simply, being part of the marathoners' "pain community," to use Atkinson's fitting term in his study of Canadian triathletes,¹⁴ has hopefully contributed to my capacity to ask valid questions during interviews.

Contextualising the Estonian marathon boom

Since the turn of the millennium, the number of people completing at least one marathon a year in Estonia has grown more than twentyfold. The year-on-year growth rate of marathon finishers until 2015 was constantly over ten percent.¹⁵ The total number of marathons run yearly by Estonian runners has grown even faster, which suggests, as also argued above, that many runners gradually increase their training volumes and the amount of their races.

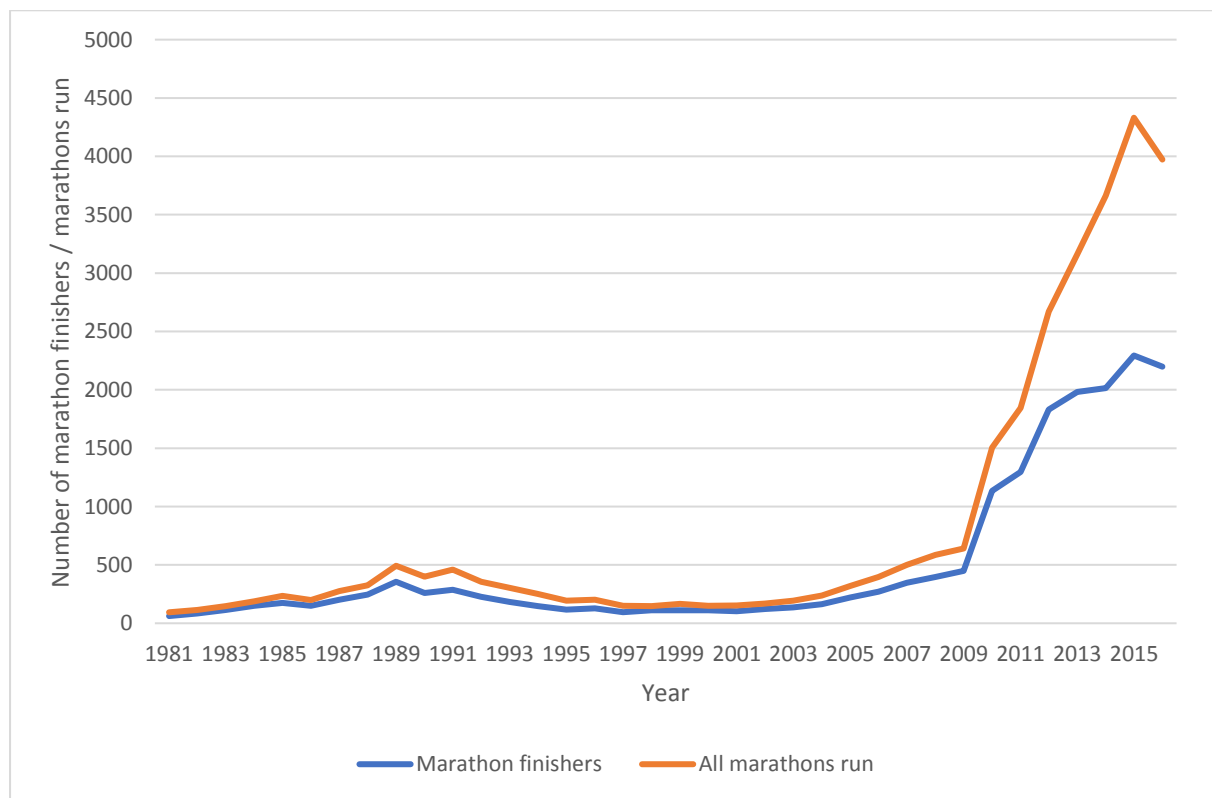


Figure 1. The total numbers of Estonian marathon finishers and all marathons run by Estonian runners in 1981-2016.

As Figure 1 demonstrates, the number of marathon finishers in Estonia grew slowly in the 1980s, the last decade of the Soviet regime, but ebbed considerably throughout the 1990s. Only 96 Estonian runners completed a marathon in 1997, for example. Such downwards trend in the 1990s is congruent with the wider socio-economic and health context of that era in Estonia. The first transitional decade took a heavy toll on the population's health, especially in case of the lower and middle class. As Cockerham has pointed out, one of the most striking developments in world health in the 1990s was the decline of life expectancy in the countries of the former Soviet Union and most of Eastern Europe.¹⁶ Rapid increase in inequality, the spread of existential uncertainty, the disappearance of various welfare guarantees, and – in the Estonian case in particular – radical and often painful economic reforms rendered the regime change traumatic for most people. This, combined with unhealthy lifestyles, smoking, and alcohol abuse that also existed before the collapse of the Soviet Union, especially among men, resulted in the precipitous decline of life expectancy after 1991 that was unprecedented in modern history – nowhere else in peace-time industrialised nations had health generally worsened.¹⁷

The trends in yearly marathon statistics – a particularly low figure of marathon finishers in the 1990s, its subsequent slow and then exponential growth especially in 2010-15 – are also congruent with the overall middle class dynamics in post-1991 Estonia. The general consensus tends to be that the share of the middle class in the country, like elsewhere in the Baltics, decreased substantially from its pre-transition level in the 1990s but increased slowly after that and has sped up since Estonia's accession to the European Union in 2004, owing to labour market developments and changes in the structure of employment and occupations, shifting it towards middle-class jobs.¹⁸

Many other factors have contributed to the exponential growth of the popularity of marathon running in recent years. Increasing health awareness is an important one,¹⁹ although the boom also owes to the successful marketing of big running events, especially of Tallinn Marathon, first organised in 2010, as well as an increasing quantity of smaller races.²⁰ Before 2010, only a few marathons a year were organised in the whole of Estonia, now the figure is around 40. Smaller races are often catered to a relatively tiny number of particularly dedicated runners, who “collect” marathons. It is also worth pointing out that the beginning of the marathon boom in Estonia roughly coincides with the Great Recession of the late 2000s. Based on my data I would be hesitant to draw a strong causal link between the two, although some individual running careers indeed began as responses to the economic hardships of that era as I will demonstrate in the “bodies for selves” section of the paper.

In a way, the increasing popularity of running in today’s Estonia is but one aspect of the general fitness and health-awareness boom, manifested in the mushrooming of sports clubs, cycling races, yoga and mindfulness classes, CrossFit gyms, health food restaurants, life-style magazines, etc. But long-distance running occupies a particular position in this context. Running marathons or even distances well beyond 42.2 kilometres is more than just a matter of runners’ preoccupation with health maintenance and fitness. Firstly, its appeal, as I will claim below, stems to a large extent from the experience of “good” pain and suffering. Many runners cherish these feelings as meaningful or even purposeful, largely because the capacity to endure them is taken to symbolise certain broader values and ideals that they believe define them as persons. Extreme exhaustion is obviously the result of all endurance sports, but the success in running, unlike in cycling or cross-country skiing, for example, is minimally affected by externalities such as sports gear and is almost exclusively credited to the individual’s personal stamina. Secondly, running, more commonly than other sports, is

practiced in public spaces, often under the gaze and in the middle of everyone else.²¹ And thirdly, long-distance running produces a very distinctive type of a body, as I will also demonstrate below.

The growth of the popularity of marathon running is notable in all age groups, but it is particularly marked among those in their early 30s to late 40s, and among both men and women. Likewise, the overall social image of running has changed, also among non-runners, as many interviewees pointed out. This is a relevant factor influencing how runners in public spaces are perceived, and consequently, to what extent being a runner symbolises a distinct and possibly coveted social status. Various older runners whom I interviewed recalled that in the 1990s they were frowned at and the contrast with the Soviet times is even more striking.²² As one runner reasoned:

“When I grew up in the 70s and 80s, stadiums were full of spectators of running competitions, but [dedicated] runners themselves were not considered quite normal. The Soviet middle class found these, mainly “country boys,” eagerly running, slightly strange. The middle class of that era did not run on the roadsides.” (Karl, 42)²³

From the international perspective, the running boom in Estonia is not novel. “Wellness syndrome,” to use an apt term by Cederström and Spicer,²⁴ has been attributable to most Euro-American societies for decades. Recreational running is but one although an important element of this. Many countries have experienced a steady growth of the popularity of running and jogging since the 1970s, when it first in the United States and then in Western Europe evolved into a popular middle class activity. Various best-selling books on running published in the late 1970s sought to demonstrate – and successfully – that running could

serve as a catalyst for the sense of personal well-being and self-esteem.²⁵ Numerous more recent studies, focusing on the US context in particular, have shown how “jogging” (that quickly transformed into “running”) during that era was “invented” as a life-style changing practice of the middle class that helped to bring a new sense of moralism to exercise culture.²⁶

There are two reasons that allow the current marathon boom in Estonia, and possibly also elsewhere in Eastern Europe, to be distinguished from these other contexts, however. The first has to do with the mere dynamics of the trend. The growth of the popularity of recreational running in Western Europe and North America was and is much more gradual, and in some cases the growth has actually slowed down or even halted. In Estonia’s neighbouring country Finland, for example, the amount of yearly marathon finishers has almost constantly dropped since 2009. Secondly, the socio-economic as well as overall health contexts of the running boom in Estonia have been very different from those in Western Europe and North America. Although the unfolding of the Estonian marathon boom has been congruent with the socio-economic development of the country and the increasing quality of life, as Mark’s running career discussed later will reveal, it has, at the same time, run counter to some of the recent health trends, as I will also demonstrate below.

Bodies for selves

As Bauman has poignantly noted, “the urge ‘to do something about my life’ is most eagerly translated into a precept ‘to do something about my body.’”²⁷ Simplifying, my middle class interlocutors’ running careers stereotypically began with an endeavour to take control of

one's own body, subjecting it to the self. With time and possibly also success, comparative and competitive relationship with other (running and non-running) bodies evolved. Perceptions of one's running body during these stages, condensed into metaphorical terms "bodies for selves" and "bodies for others," constitute the central focus of the next two sections. In this first, "bodies for selves" section, I will map the various ways that the "running body" has shifted to the core of my interlocutors "reformed" understanding of "good life" while they have gotten increasingly involved in the sport. In this process, their "running bodies" have evolved – to varying degrees depending on the runner – into a symbol of particular social values, into a source of self-confidence, sense of "being in control" as well as self-knowledge, and into a site for experiencing "good" pain, exhaustion, and suffering. The latter, for this particular segment of the Estonian middle class, is not just a new form of embodying "good life." The valorization of "good" pain, exhaustion, and suffering also constitutes an implicit critique of the bodily comfort and hedonistic pleasures of consumption, associated with the general idea of the middle class version of "good life" in Estonia – a topic that I will return to also in the subsequent "bodies for others" section.

Firstly and most recurrently, the appeal of long-distance running was described by my middle class interlocutors in terms of its congruence with the broader values that they already held in high regard. Producing a fit running body, or what both Elias and Shilling have called a "civilised body,"²⁸ hence simply meant bringing the body into accordance with one's self. For many, starting to subject their bodies to regular physical strain through running corresponded to the ideals of self-discipline, motivation, diligence, and perseverance that they vocally applauded to in their professional and private lives. As one interviewee explained his philosophy of running:

“Marathon is a sufficiently ambitious goal, sufficiently challenging, to make you feel that you have achieved something. For me it is part of the self-discipline, the setting of concrete goals and achieving them, measuring myself against the clock.” (Jaak, 41)

Another runner (Tiina, 39) even went as far as suggesting that marathoners’ willingness to endure prolonged physical strain was a sign of their intelligence. “Intelligent people are generally more ambitious, more inclined towards perfectionism, and relatively more goal-oriented,” she argued. Such and many similar claims suggest a direct association of running and through this the cultivation of a fit running body with middle class specific values and understandings of subjectivity. Obviously there exists no definite and universal set of such values and personhood traits. Nevertheless, the different characteristics that various authors have singled out – for example, respect for individual achievement, positive attitude toward regular work, discipline, competitiveness, propensity for rationality and emotional control, meritocratic outlook on life, aspiration, and ambition – have all an affinity with the perceptions, shared by many among my interlocutors, of what running and having a fit body signifies.²⁹ The latter claim is also supported by the particular forms of self-fashioning that are manifest in various runners’ blogs. Beyond being self-inflicted panopticons, as suggested above, these blogs also constitute a means for creating public selves through and beyond running. The titles of some that I followed – “Invest and run,” “Explore and run,” or “Work hard, train harder,”³⁰ for example – establish an explicit link between having physical stamina and being a certain kind of a person who values, strives for, and also enjoys professional success.

Secondly, running and cultivating a runner’s body was also perceived by my interlocutors as a source of self-confidence, contributing to one’s sense of “being in control” and “bringing

order” to one’s life. In this case, it might be argued, it is not the body that, through training, is brought into accordance with one’s self but the other way around. Many runners whom I interviewed implicitly and sometimes quite explicitly admitted that they felt more “confident” and “able” after having finished their first marathon. By this they did not imply just the physical achievement itself, but “having stamina” more generally. In other words, runners extended the experience of being physically fit to various non-physical aspects of their personal and professional selves. As Reischer has also suggested, running a marathon is a project of self-transformation not just because it is about getting fit or keeping healthy but because it easily translates into an accomplishment encapsulated in the phrase “I did it.”³¹

The role of running in “bringing order” to one’s life has been especially important for runners who have experienced difficulties in their professional or private lives. Some interviewees suggested that running had helped them to survive the economic crisis and retain self-confidence during difficult times, for example. The Great Recession hit Estonia and other Baltic countries particularly hard: the real growth GDP in Estonia dropped by 5.4 percent in 2008 and by 14.7 percent in 2009 which was the second-biggest drop in the European Union.³² Although it could be argued that the middle class, disproportionately employed in the public sector and hence having relatively higher level of job security, suffered less during the crisis than those at the top or at the bottom of the social ladder,³³ the subjective self-evaluations, based on Eurobarometer data, actually suggest the opposite. Martin (37), for example, recalled:

“The years of 2008-2010 were particularly difficult for my business but it would have been even harder if I hadn’t started running marathons. Running clears up your head. I was under immense stress and this would have been devastating without running. But I

sorted out my life by 2013 – this was the year of standing up, of taking a strong grip on things. Such internal stability and strength owed a lot to running and the goals I had set to myself as a runner.”

For others, competitions in particular have constituted an antidote to the lack of success and achievable benchmarks at work. As one interviewee described it:

“I started my own company in 2002 and for years it was a job of a lonely wolf. You work hard but there are no rewards, just setbacks. Running competitions gave me a lot of self-confidence. You reach the finishing line, you get a result – it is a completed activity” (Indrek, 44).

Both Martin’s and Indrek’s motivations for becoming a long-distance could thus be interpreted in terms of *taking control* of their bodies in times when the economy was *out of control*.

Taking control of one’s body often also translates into taking control of one’s health.

Although Cockerham’s claim that in previous historical eras people took their health more or less for granted is exaggerated, if not erroneous,³⁴ it is nevertheless true that the attitudes towards health and one’s personal responsibility for and control over it have changed. Health nowadays has become viewed almost as an achievement – something that people are themselves responsible for and can work at through lifestyle choices and the design of their own bodies.³⁵ The beginning of Mark’s running career described below is an eloquent illustration of this. Many other Estonian runners, men in particular, recalled the discrepancy that marked their lives before they started running. Their professional careers were moving

upwards and their life standards were improving rapidly, but they felt that their bodies were unfit, unhealthy, and overweight. It is significant that of all sports they chose running to achieve a “civilised body.” As a strictly health-oriented practice running is meaningful in relation to quite theoretical and abstract knowledge about the effects of an exercise. Above all, it presupposes a rational faith in the deferred, often intangible profits it offers, as Bourdieu has also noted.³⁶ Members of the middle class are particularly well-positioned for such reflexive making of themselves.³⁷ Following this logic, Smith, for example, also suggests that British non-elite runners belong predominantly to the middle class because it is mainly among the middle class (and above) that people are likely to believe that they have actual control over their health through the choice of an appropriate lifestyle; they have time and resources needed to start treating their body as a project.³⁸

Controlling one’s body means getting to know it better. The use of modern technology has enabled many runners to become well-informed about various measurable aspects of their bodies such as body mass index, aerobic and anaerobic heart rate levels, maximal oxygen consumption, caloric intake, and weekly, monthly, or yearly mileages and hours spent on training. Such technologically enhanced and informed self-surveillance constitutes a new form of biopolitics that fits with the neoliberal values of efficiency and productivity, admittedly at the core of middle class specific understanding of personhood as has been eloquently shown also in recent studies of the so-called Quantified Self.³⁹ Many interviewed runners kept meticulous training logs and most seemed to constantly compete with their “past selves,” both during the races and while training for these. With time this disciplined approach often extended beyond the realm of running – for example, to eating, drinking, and sleeping habits, or to how one travels, for work and for leisure.⁴⁰

The process of cultivating a sense of control over and knowledge about one's body does not fit unequivocally, however, into the analytical framework that builds on such familiar Foucauldian notions as discipline, surveillance, technologies of the self, and docile bodies. The runners' changing attitudes towards the use of technological gadgets are a good example. By extensively training their running bodies, many runners also learn to become independent of, circumvent, and contest measurement. Various interviewees claimed that they knew and were able to "listen" to their bodies so well that they no longer needed a heart rate monitor, for instance. Female runners in particular claimed that they felt "liberated" and "more autonomous" after giving up using a sports watch, for example. Foucault's "technologies of the self," of course, also implies the internalisation of self-discipline and surveillance, but in case of many runners giving up technological gadgets coincided with their changed perception of running as such and its meaning for their *selves*. The experience often came to be described in terms of almost a spiritual transformation or transcendence – as "purification" or as "becoming alive," for example. Various runners shifted to running ultra-marathons, often in mountainous environments, which, although physically more demanding, provided sufficient satisfaction and the feeling of accomplishment from reaching the finishing line alone. Some eventually turned to more mindful modes of running that led to yet new "bodies for selves" experiences. As one runner (Kaarel, 34) suggested, he no longer perceived his runs as training but as occasions of "meeting with what a run can offer me." The aim of running for him now was purely to "find *himself* through running." Another runner (Katrin, 47) claimed that her runs had with time evolved into moments to "return to and be with *herself*."

Thirdly and perhaps most importantly, however, running has enabled my interlocutors to transform their bodies into sites for experiencing "good" pain, exhaustion, and suffering.

Many runners expressed their feeling of satisfaction from the physical exhaustion that training for and completing a marathon produced in various alternative ways – as “being addicted to pain” or as “feeling alive” thanks to it, for example. Some also claimed that they could no longer fathom their life without running and the ensuing feeling of exhaustion. This has been noticed in various other studies. As Glassner argues, for instance, selfhood in case of fitness-obsessed people often becomes equated with fitness activities.⁴¹ McKenzie has similarly approached the pursuit of fitness, often accompanied by profound but necessary exhaustion, as the hall-mark of (American) middle class lifestyle and identity.⁴² Atkinson, in turn, demonstrates how middle class triathletes in Canada come together as a mutually recognised “pain community” of like-minded actors and how they learn to relish self-imposed physical and mental suffering as exciting and personally significant. Furthermore, their ability to withstand and relish athletic suffering – that Atkinson also calls “civilised” or “controlled suffering” – is embraced as a form of social distinction. Atkinson interprets this as his interlocutors’ shared *habitus*, a metaphorical manifestation of their middle class tastes and sensibilities, and collective preference for achieving work-like goals in the leisure sphere.⁴³

But my interviewees not only glorified pain – they also took pride in the ability and knowledge, acquired through practice, of how to “trick,” “overcome,” “conquer,” “silence,” or “ignore” it. Those who run ultra-races, are particularly experienced with this. As one dedicated ultra-marathoner summed it up:

“Ignoring is the best strategy, when you have pain in your knee, hip, or back. You have to be strong and believe that it will pass. It *really* is a matter of belief.” (Madis, 43)

Thus, athletic suffering, pain, or even agony become part of the runners' satisfaction with and feeling good about themselves in somewhat contradictory ways – these experiences are strived for but also silenced. The physical stamina needed to endure suffering and the mental stamina required to ignore it appear to be the two sides of the same coin. Considering the centrality of purposeful suffering in the bodily experience of marathon running as well as runners' frequent use of the terms like “purification” or even “rebirth” to describe their experience of completing a race, it is not surprising that some of them explicitly compared running to religion, Christianity in particular. As Kristjan (52), a mathematician teaching at a university, suggested: “both draw on faith in becoming a better person and in redemption through suffering.” Although for an outsider the runners' suffering might stand for self-restraint, for runners themselves, as Kristjan's argument implies, such asceticism is a meaningful vehicle for becoming “better,” for achieving “good life.” As Weber also emphasises in *Protestant Ethic*, “[t]he goal of asceticism was, in contrast to many widely held notions, to be able to lead a watchful, aware, alert life,” further arguing that “[t]he most important means employed by asceticism was to bring order into the conduct of life of those who practiced it.”⁴⁴ These ideas, despite the fact that Weber was writing about the history of Puritan asceticism after Reformation, can be extrapolated to the context of the Estonian running boom as well. Many among my interviewees, just like Martin and others referred to above, described running explicitly in terms of “getting a grip on” or “bringing order to” their lives.

Bodies for others

Healthy-looking and fit running body symbolizes the values, character, and capacities of its owner not only to him- or herself, but it also becomes the visible manifestation of the person for *others*. The desired long-distance runner's body is of a very particular kind – slim and sleek, lean and muscular. The normalisation of this body type as an ideal owes largely to media, as Abbas has convincingly shown in her study of three major international running magazines (*Runner's World*, *Running Times*, *Trail Running*), also read regularly by some among my interviewees.⁴⁵ Estonian running community's own monthly *Jooksja* [*Runner*], published since 2009, similarly contributes to constructing a very particular image of the ideal runner's body that appears on most of its covers. It is also notable that *Jooksja* explicitly defines itself as “a magazine for an athletic and strong-minded person, who sets goals for [him- or herself] in life and strives towards these.”

Runners who through meticulous training have achieved a “runner's body” often take pride in it. Smith has similarly argued that British non-elite runners believe they enjoy the respect and admiration of non-runners through a demonstration of physical prowess that running long distances requires.⁴⁶ Among my interviewees, middle-aged male runners in particular admitted to frequently comparing themselves to men who do not exercise, and some said they felt physically more able and even younger as a result of such comparison. A 41-year-old runner who taught at a university, claimed, for example:

“When I see men of my age who do not do sports, I sometimes feel victorious for being in good shape, for feeling physically much younger than I am. If I would be put on the starting line with my 20-year-old students, I would most probably win them all.” (Priit)

Various among my interlocutors, both male and female, claimed that as runners who took care of their bodies, they considered it legitimate to criticise people who were not fit, describing them as “lazy,” “looking ill,” or “lacking self-discipline.” Some runners were quite explicitly and openly judgmental about the bodies of their colleagues or friends, for example.⁴⁷ Overweight bodies were interpreted not just as aesthetically unpleasant – in dedicated runners’ opinion they often also symbolised moral lapse. Atkinson similarly found that the hyper-health orientations that middle class Canadian triathletes developed, often penetrated their everyday assessments of others’ eating, exercise, work, or even relationship habits.⁴⁸ For them, their slim body, embedded in the culturally “de-civilised,” sedentary, and over-weight middle class – the reference group being namely their own class – owned a definitive exchange value and had become a representation of what “everyone else” was not: dedicated, controlled, disciplined, culturally and economically invested in health, and self-responsible.⁴⁹ These arguments are in line with Susan Bordo’s “reading [of] the slender body” in her feminist analysis of Western cultural perspectives on weight, weight loss, and body ideals.⁵⁰ As Bordo suggests, there is a tendency to regard excess body weight as reflecting moral or personal inadequacy and lack of will. A developed body, as Bordo claims, “has become a symbol of correct attitude; it means that one ‘cares’ about oneself and how one appears to others, suggesting willpower, energy, control over infantile impulse, the ability to ‘shape your life.’”⁵¹

In other words, normalised thin and sleek running bodies that look “good” according to Westernised social and gender-specific norms have become symbolised as “successful bodies.” This image, as well as the association between physical prowess and entrepreneurial nature, has been consciously cultivated, for example, by the center-right and liberal Estonian Reform Party,⁵² many leading politicians of which are publicly known to engage in

endurance sports. Some among my interviewees also claimed that their employers valued and often also financially supported their running endeavours, not only because they expected their employees to be fit and healthy but because it was good for the organisation's public image, emphasising productivity. Returning to Bordo – a fit and slender running body could also be interpreted as a “productive body” that symbolically stands for a moralising discourse on over-consumption.⁵³ Bordo eloquently demonstrates how bodies could be “read” as responses to the pressures of consumer capitalism. A slender and firm body stands for an ideal balance between production and consumption – marked, visibly on the body, are one's ideals of and also one's capacity for self-regulation, self-discipline, and self-control. The obese body, on the contrary, could be interpreted as giving in to consumption.

A fit running body is thus not merely a “body for self” but also a “body for others,” constituting physical capital that can be exposed to and also compared to other bodies. The term, in the form of “bodies-for-others” (*corps-pour-autrui*) is originally Bourdieu's. In *Distinction*, Bourdieu suggests that “the concern to cultivate the body appears in its elementary form, often associated with an ascetic exaltation of sobriety and controlled diet, in the middle classes.” Members of the middle class, as he argues, are especially anxious about their appearance and therefore their “bodies for others.” The middle class mainly treats the body as an end in itself whereas the members of the working class have a more instrumental relationship with their bodies and perceive the body as a means to an end.⁵⁴ Bourdieu further notes that a sport is more likely to be adopted by a social class if it does not contradict that class's relation to the body at its deepest and most unconscious level.⁵⁵ The working classes prefer contact sports, the middle classes tend to choose activities that produce an attractive “body for others” while the upper classes engage in sports in exclusive clubs with minimal bodily contact between the competitors. Bourdieu mentions gymnastics, but also walking and

jogging as the sports likely to be adopted by the middle class. These sports fit the ascetic dispositions of those individuals who are prepared to find satisfaction in the effort itself.

It is important to note that the Estonian running boom, powered mainly by middle class runners, is happening in the context of and despite the rather bleak trends of the country's various health indicators, also among the middle class. According to the latest data by the Estonian National Institute for Health Development, in 2016, 32.5 percent of the Estonian population (aged 16-64) was overweight (BMI=25.0-29.9) and 19.2 percent was obese (BMI \geq 30.0).⁵⁶ Whereas obesity is slightly more common among the lower-earning and least educated sectors of the population, being overweight is more pronounced among the middle- and top-earning, and university-educated people. Moreover, 30.2 percent of men and 23.9 percent of women do not engage in any physical exercise.⁵⁷ The expected healthy life years among Estonian men in 2016 were 54.4 – the second-worst figure in the whole of the European Union and well below the EU countries' average (63.5). The respective figure for women (59.0), although better than that for men, has not improved over the past ten years.⁵⁸

All this indicates that the gap between the hyper-healthy and the rest of the population is widening and this is also happening within the middle class. The recreational long-distance runners whom I interviewed, just like the middle class triathletes described by Atkinson, opposed themselves, first and foremost, to the stereotypical and prevailing body type and the relatively unhealthy lifestyle of their own social class. The “others” of the middle class running bodies under scrutiny here are hence not only bodies of other classes, but also and even more importantly so the sedentary and increasingly overweight bodies of the middle class itself. This observation concurs with Latham's argument, developed in the US context, that jogging as a middle class fitness habit was “invented” namely as a palliative to

sedentariness among that very class.⁵⁹

Very few people can readily profit from their “natural body” as a “body for others,” to use another of Bourdieu’s terms,⁶⁰ but most can develop a “distinctive body” through training. The viability of such an endeavour is, however, affected by one’s class position. Running, although a relatively inexpensive and affordable pastime, does not escape the ethos of consumerism and hence income-related constraints. Some dedicated runners spend considerable sums of money on specialized running gear and technology. Marathon tourism has become increasingly popular, despite the rather high race registration fees, travelling costs, and the worsening security situation in Europe and elsewhere. In recent years, nearly a quarter of all marathons run by Estonian runners have been completed abroad. Furthermore, many among my interviewees admitted that in light of the marathon boom, completing a marathon had become for them too mainstream an activity and they were now searching for alternative ways of running. Some of these runners were frequent participants in marathons and ultra-running races in the Alps, in Sub-Saharan Africa, in Greenland, and elsewhere. Needless to say that these new forms of and contexts for running are also more expensive and hence exclusive.

The latter aspect is relevant for many runners’ public self-fashioning – reports from such alternative races are commonly posted in personal blogs and Facebook groups for Estonian runners. These reports often include aestheticized photos of the author running with picturesque scenery in the background; in case of mountain races, the reports frequently include a route altitude profile, the possible brutality of which can be a source of pride. Some runners directly associate themselves with an international reference group of long-distance runners, identifying the foreign blogs that they regularly follow by linking these to their own.

The foreign component in the blogs is further fostered by references to international journal articles and books on training, recovery, and injuries, or most recent trends in the running gear and technological gadget market, and nutrition. By explicitly aligning themselves also with foreign runners and by drawing on ideas from the international media, these Estonian runners appropriate ideals that arise from both imported and local values and practices, and are thus in conversation with each other.

One's class position affects the viability of cultivating a trained and fit running body also otherwise – besides financial it also presupposes the availability of temporal resources. Bourdieu, as well as others have likewise pointed to the fact that the very participation in sport requires *spare time* which, in fact, is a transformed form of economic capital.⁶¹ The very idea of having free time and being able to display this by outdoors running can constitute a status marker, as some interviewees openly admitted. It can be a symbol of economic security and self-sufficiency, a privilege, not shared by everyone, to “take time out.” As Karl (45) argued:

“If you run during the daytime, it means that you are in charge of your life and successful in the sense that you control your own time, you can afford to exercise during the day – like a business-owner who has hired a reliable manager, or an academic, for example. Surely, runners in nice clothes on the streets at noon is at least a middle class phenomenon.”

Yet, within these class-specific financial and temporal confines, cultivating a running body is a matter of choice. Coming back to Weber's juxtaposition of life chances and life choices – even though individuals can make choices only within the constraints of their class-specific

life-chances, inside these constraints they are free and hence responsible for their choices. This freedom of choice is not fixed but affected, in transitional societies especially, by the overall changes in one's "class situation" to use another Weber's term by which he meant "the typical probability of procuring good, gaining position in life, and finding inner satisfactions."⁶² As the example of Mark's running career below will demonstrate, the propensity to cultivate a running body and develop a novel outlook on "good life" with an increased focus on bodily rather than material prosperity and gratification, has to be scrutinised in the context of changing class situation of the Estonian middle class throughout the period of post-socialist transition.

Mark's running career

Mark (45) who at the time of interviewing worked as a managing director of a successful media agency ran his first marathon in 2010 and is now a sub-3-hour marathoner. As a teenager in the early 1980s Mark used to sail at junior elite level, but after finishing high school, he quit sports for nearly two decades:

"In the 1990s, the priorities were different – starting a family, sorting out my life, university studies, building up my career, constructing a house. A myriad of things. Times at work were super-busy. In the context of all this, it didn't even occur to me to do sports. A real roller-coaster till I was eventually middle-aged. And I think many others were caught up in this kind of a life. One had to work two or three jobs to secure satisfactory income. In the 1990s it was a luxury to have an 8-hour working day. We also worked during weekends, which now sounds unbelievable. The 1990s was a

decade entirely dedicated to work. The following decade was slightly better, weekends were mostly free, but the workday itself was extensible in any direction. At the height of the economic boom in 2005, we in the media sector had so long working hours that it was impossible to be interested in sports. It is only now that most of us in the middle class have achieved a life that can be characterised by routine and welfare.”

This excerpt from my interview with Mark broadly captures the lived reality of the two transitional decades for the majority of the members of the emerging middle class in post-1991 Estonia.⁶³ Although socialist countries never really ceased to be class-based societies,⁶⁴ it is fair to argue that household income inequality in pre-1991 Estonia was fairly modest, just like in most other Soviet republics. The ensuing socio-economic transition, however, brought rapid and deep changes to the country’s class structure and caused a sharp increase of inequality.⁶⁵ Estonia experienced this particularly drastically – the country’s Gini coefficient jumped from 28.0 in 1989-90 to 39.8 in 1994-5.⁶⁶ Compared to its Baltic neighbours, Estonia introduced radical economic reforms and privatization earlier and moved more rapidly to a liberal market economy – this supported growth, but also contributed to a quick rise in inequality.⁶⁷ As argued earlier, the first transitional decade in particular also took a heavy toll on the population’s health.

Hence, just like Mark, many among today’s middle-aged middle class who constitute the main engine of the current running boom, were overworked during the first two decades of the transition – first to make the ends meet and then to enjoy Western-style levels of consumption and material comfort, to generalise liberally. By 2007 Mark was obese; he weighed 103 kilos, smoked heavily, and felt totally out of shape, uncomfortable in and unhappy with his body and fitness level. “It was not a nice experience,” as he describes

looking at his own reflection in the mirror back then. Similarly to many others among my interviewees, he eventually realised that he needed to bring “order to his life.” After some experimentation with other sports Mark dedicated himself entirely to running – it appealed to him because of its efficiency and simplicity, and it fit better than other sports with his busy work schedule and his responsibilities as a father of three teenage children.

Mark first went jogging once or twice a week on his own but soon joined a running club and decided to get a personal coach. “My development was explosive,” as he recalls. His first marathon boosted his confidence even further – the finishing time 3:47 was far better than he had expected. Four years later he broke the three-hour mark and was at the time of interviewing among the best Estonian runners in his age group, taking part in roughly twenty races a year. However, unlike many other runners who with time have tended to increase their training volumes considerably – some among my interviewees trained 13 times and ran up to 200 kilometres a week – Mark has retained a time-efficient and rational approach to training. He never trains more than five times a week, but his physical preparation is coupled with controlled diet, measured lifestyle, and strict self-discipline, all of which is geared towards better results in the competitions. Even his social life tends to “dry up” during summer months and the competitions season, when he has no time for friends and relatives, partly because socialising means eating and drinking in ways that would hinder his performance. Allegedly, his body now instinctively yearns for certain kinds of foodstuffs only and the “old school cuisine,” as Mark calls it, is no longer appropriate for him. Despite his determination, Mark is realistic about what he can achieve as a runner through controlled diet:

“I know that I might be able to further drop my weight to 75 kilos but for what? If I was

25 and I had justified hopes to achieve something major as a runner, I'd perhaps try it.

But I will be 46 soon and I am already a grandfather!"

Mark now weighs 25 kilos less than ten years ago and admits being pleased with having a "runner's body" that makes him look and feel physically much younger than most men of his age. Occasionally he has even been carded when buying alcohol, despite being in his mid-forties. Yet the difference between the reactions of his colleagues towards his "past" and "present selves" has been somewhat paradoxical:

"When I weighed 103 kilos and felt physically awful, nobody came worryingly to ask whether I was alright. But now, when I very systematically follow my training plan, wear a running watch, control, observe, and analyse myself constantly, eat healthily, people are concerned about whether I am OK. It's all upside down. The truth is that they should worry about a middle-aged fat guy and not me."

Mark describes himself as a "serious enthusiast," but what motivates him ultimately to take running so seriously is "the beauty of the game," as he calls it, and how running helps him to structure his day and render him more efficient at work. His entire competitions calendar is set before the year begins, he keeps up to date with his competitors' results, and he has a personal running blog. Everything he does is meticulously rationalised and planned. "If there are inputs, there must be outputs. A hobby pays off when there are results," Mark sums up his take on recreational running. Yet he refuses to see his serious dedication to long-distance running as a manifestation of the putative "mid-life crisis" but regards training and competitions as endeavours that have become achievable and prioritised sources of "good life" simply because of his changed "life chances":

“Crisis in what sense? I now have temporal resources that I do not have to spend entirely on slaving at work! Children have grown up and for the first time in my life I can concentrate entirely on myself. This is a pure opportunity.”

Also, Mark considers that he is pretty much a typical middle-aged member of Estonia’s contemporary middle class who, in the context of increased welfare and economic stability, is looking for new challenges and healthy bodily experiences. Becoming a serious recreational runner was a timed life choice for him and this has also been the case with many others I interviewed. The average age of the first-time marathoner (roughly 34 years for both men and women) is now 5-6 years higher than in the 1990s. The average age of all marathoners has also been increasing over the past five years, amounting to 38.2 for 2017, and people in their forties, just like Mark, are, relatively speaking, the fastest growing age group among Estonian marathon finishers.⁶⁸

Conclusion

Two topics could be considered central to the research on “running bodies” in social sciences as Smith has noted in his study of British non-elite runners – the importance of the body as constitutive of the self and the role of the body in carrying distinctive physical capital.⁶⁹ These themes, rephrased as “bodies for selves” and as “bodies for others,” have also served as my points of departure for scrutinizing “running bodies” in the context of the Estonian marathon boom and for making two broader analytical claims.

Firstly, for the Estonian middle class, a deliberately prioritised and achievable aspiration for a fit body is a relatively recent phenomenon. Its increasing relevance has to be understood in the general context of socio-economic transition, class dynamics, and changes in the quality of life. Consequently, the satisfaction of material desires – the dominant foundation of the middle class as well other social layers’ understanding of “good life” during the 1990s and the first decade of this century – has made room to putting more value on other forms of capital, including the bodily one. My interlocutors perceived their fit running bodies to communicate various values and ideals, such as diligence, self-restraint, discipline, strict work ethic, being in control, competitiveness, efficiency, ambition, motivation, competitiveness, perseverance, and so on, that on their own are not exclusively but as a set are distinctively of middle class nature. To this list I have added the capacity to endure (purposeful) pain and suffering, inevitable by-products of endurance sports, that have acquired a particularly meaningful position in this population segment’s novel understanding of “good life.”

Secondly, I have suggested that running bodies could be considered to communicate distinctive values and ideals not only to runners themselves but also to others.

By cultivating a certain kind of a body and valorizing a certain kind of “good” pain and suffering, the marathoners forge themselves as a certain kind of a middle class person. As a subset of an Estonian middle class, they consciously and actively distinguish themselves from an “average” middle class person in Estonia, opposing themselves, first and foremost, to the mainstream version of “good life” of their own class, associated with increasingly overweight and sedentary bodies that, unlike toned and slim running bodies, fail to communicate the disciplined image of their bearer and the values held in high regard by the society.

Notes

1. P. Bourdieu, "Program for a Sociology of Sport," *Sociology of Sport Journal* 5 (1988): 153-61; P. Bourdieu, "Sport and Social Class," in *Rethinking Popular Culture: Contemporary Perspectives in Cultural Studies*, ed. C. Mukerji, and M. Schudson, 357-373 (Berkeley/Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1991 [1978]); P. Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002 [1979]). Inspired by his seminal work, an increasing number of studies have recently explored the relationship between sports and class, and the analysis of sporting preferences among the middle class has also proliferated.
2. M. Lauristin, "Eesti elanikkonna subjektiivne kihistumine," in *Eesti ühiskond kiirenevas ajas: Uuringu "Mina. Maailm. Meedia" 2002-2014 tulemused*, ed. P. Vihalemm, M. Lauristin, V. Kalmus, and T. Vihalemm (Tartu: Tartu Ülikooli Kirjastus, 2017), 668.
3. J. Kocka, "The Middle Classes in Europe," *The Journal of Modern History* 67, no. 4 (1995): 786-7.
4. See, e.g., K. Fehervary, "American Kitchens, Luxury Bathrooms, and the Search for a 'Normal' Life in Postsocialist Hungary," *Ethnos* 67, no. 3 (2002): 369-400; J. Patico and M. L. Caldwell, "Consumers Exiting Socialism: Ethnographic Perspectives on Daily Life in Post-Communist Europe," *Ethnos* 67, no. 3 (2002): 285-294; J. Patico, *Consumption and Social Change in a Post-Soviet Middle Class* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008); D. Eglitis, "Class, Culture, and Consumption: Representations of Stratification in Post-communist Latvia," *Cultural Sociology* 5, no. 3 (2011): 423-446; *EEPS* special issue on "Class after Communism"[29, no. 3 (2015)].
5. See, e.g., J. Robbins, "Beyond the Suffering Subject: Toward an Anthropology of the Good," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 19, no. 3(2013), 447-462.; E. R. Fischer, *The Good Life: Aspirations, Dignity, and the Anthropology of Well-Being* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014); H. Walker and I. Kavedžija, "Introduction: Values of happiness," *Hau: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 5, no 3 (2015): 1-23; J. Robbins, "On Happiness, Values, and Time: The Long and the Short of It," *Hau: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 5, no. 3 (2015): 215-233.
6. M. Atkinson, "Triathlon, Suffering and Exciting Significance," *Leisure Studies* 27 (2008): 165-180; E. L. Reischer, "Running to the Moon: The Articulation and

- Construction of Self in Marathon Runners, *Anthropology of Consciousness* 12, no. 2 (2001): 19-34.
7. M. Weber, *Economy and Society*, 2 Vols (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978 [1925]).
 8. The statistical information presented in this article has been retrieved from the online database at www.marathon100.com.
 9. By “serious recreational runners” I refer to the individuals who purposefully train for and take part in marathons (and other races). Obviously, the concept need not be limited to marathoners only or to those, who participate in the races, but my interest is specifically in *long-distance* running and focusing on runners who *do* take part in competitions has enabled me to make use of the statistical data available for this selected group at marathon100.com.
 10. This applies particularly to smaller races with less than 100 participants. Why this is so, and how ethnicity in Estonia is linked to the topics of inequality, class, and post-socialist transition in general remain outside the focus of this paper.
 11. B. Ehrenreich and J. Ehrenreich, “The Professional-Managerial Class,” *Radical America* 11, no. 2 (1977): 7-31.
 12. See. e.g., A. Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late-Modern Age* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991); R. Crompton, *Class and Stratification* (Oxford: Polity Press, 1998).
 13. J. Allen-Collinson, “Sporting Embodiment: Sports Studies and the (Continuing) Promise of Phenomenology,” *Qualitative Research in Sport and Exercise* 1, no. 3 (2009): 279-296.
 14. Atkinson, “Triathlon.”
 15. The figure dropped for the first time in 2016, although it is too early to say, whether the slump is temporary or not.
 16. W. C. Cockerham, “The Social Determinants of the Decline of Life Expectancy in Russia and Eastern Europe: A Lifestyle Explanation,” *Journal of Health and Social Behaviour* 38, no. 2 (1997): 117.
 17. Life expectancy in Estonia in 1979-80 was 64.2 years for men and 74.2 for women; in 1991-92 the respective figures had dropped to 62.4 and 73.8 (Cockerham, “The Social Determinants,” 119).
 18. J. Masso, I. Mierina, and K. Espendberg, “Is the World of Work Stimulating Middle-Class Growth in the Baltic States,” in *Europe’s Disappearing Middle Class? Evidence*

- from the World of Work*, ed. D. Vaughan-Whitehead (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2016), 106.
19. Various state initiatives to promote healthy lifestyle were launched in 2010-15. For example, the year 2014 was declared the “Year of Sports” by the Estonian Ministry of Culture. Its various events, organised by the Estonian Olympic Committee, aimed at increasing the number of people engaged in physical activities on a regular basis.
 20. Partly, the growth can be explained by the aging of those marathoners who picked up running in the past and keep actively keep running, while new and younger runners join in. But the fact remains that running is now considerably more popular in all age groups, that the average age of the first-time marathoner has increased in recent years, and that the number of yearly multi-marathoners has grown considerably. In 2016, the number of marathon finishers and marathons run by Estonian runners dropped for the first time in fifteen years, although it is impossible to determine at this point whether the slump is temporary or not.
 21. Of course, this potentially applies to all outdoor sports, but unlike running, the other sporting activities are usually spatially more confined or practised in non-urban environments.
 22. This is not to argue that Soviet socialism did not encourage fitness and care for the body among the urban working class. The exciting topic of the Soviet regime’s attention to workers’ health and fitness remains outside the scope of the current paper.
 23. All interlocutors’ names are pseudonyms, the accompanying number indicates the person’s age.
 24. C. Cederström and A. Spicer, *The Wellness Syndrome* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2015).
 25. See, e.g., J. Fixx, *The Complete Book of Running* (New York: Random House, 1977); G. Sheehan, *Running and Being: The Total Experience* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1978).
 26. See, e.g. S. McKenzie, *Getting Physical: The Rise of Fitness Culture in America* (Lawrence: University of Kansa Press, 2013); A. Latham, “The History of a Habit: Jogging as a Palliative to Sedentariness in 1960s America,” *Cultural Geographies* 22, no. 1 (2015): 103-126.
 27. Z. Bauman, “Industrialism, Consumerism, and Power,” *Theory, Culture & Society* 1, no. 3 (1983): 41.

28. N. Elias, *What is Sociology?* (London: Hutchinson, 1978), 140; C. Shilling, "The Body, Class, and Social Inequalities," in *Equality, Education and Physical Education*, ed. J. Evans, (Lewes: Falmer Press, 1993), 163.
29. Kocka, "The Middle Classes," 786-7; Weber, *Economy and Society*.
30. These titles are translations from Estonian.
31. Reischer, "Running," 19.
32. Eurostat (<https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat>, accessed 28 August, 2018).
33. Masso *et al*, "Is the World of Work," 69.
34. W. C. Cockerham, "Health Lifestyle Theory and the Convergence of Agency and Structure," *Journal of Health and Social Behaviour* 46, no. 1 (2005), 51.
35. *Ibid.*, 52.
36. Bourdieu, *Distinction*, 214.
37. See also Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity*.
38. S. L. Smith, "British Nonélite Road Running and Masculinity: A Case of Running Repairs?" *Men and Masculinities* 3, no. 2 (2000), 198.
39. See, *e.g.*, C. Till, Exercise as Labour: Quantified Self and the Transformation of Exercise into Labour, *Societies* 4, no. 3 (2014): 446–462; M. Ruckenstein and M. Pantzar, "Beyond the Quantified Self: Thematic Explorations of a Dataistic Paradigm," *New Media & Society* 19, no. 3 (2017): 401-418.
40. Various runners claimed, for example, that when making their travel plans, the possibility to go for a run was often decisive when choosing between alternative flights and hotels.
41. B. Glassner, "Fitness and the Postmodern Self," *Journal of Health and Social Behaviour* 30, no. 2 (1989): 185.
42. McKenzie, *Getting Physical*.
43. Atkinson, "Triathlon," 165-173.
44. M. Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the "Spirit" of Capitalism* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2002 [1905]), 81.
45. A. Abbas, "The Embodiment of Class, Gender and Age Through Leisure: A Realist Analysis of Long-Distance Running," *Leisure Studies* 23 (2004): 159-175.
46. Smith, "British."
47. In some cases, such criticism is mutual, however. Although my data do not include interviews with non-runners, various among my interlocutors alluded to the fact that they

were occasionally ridiculed and made fun of for their running habit by colleagues and relatives.

48. Atkinson, "Triathlon."
49. Ibid., 176.
50. S. Bordo, *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).
51. Ibid., 195.
52. The Estonian Reform Party belonged to the government in 1999-2016 and was the Prime Minister's party in 2007-2016.
53. Bordo, *Unbearable Weight*.
54. Bourdieu, *Distinction*, 213.
55. Ibid., 218.
56. M. Tekkel and T. Veideman, *Health Behavior among Estonian Adult Population, 2016*, (Tallinn: National Institute for Health Development, 2017), 56-57. The respective figures for 2014 were 32.5 and 19.5, and 29.9 and 19.0 for 2012.
57. Ibid., 47
58. Eurostat (<http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat>, accessed 20 June, 2018).
59. Latham, "The History."
60. Bourdieu, *Distinction*, 193.
61. Bourdieu, "Sport and Social Class," 368; R. E. Washington and D. Karen, "Sport and Society," *Annual Review of Sociology* 27 (2001): 190.
62. Weber, *Economy and Society*, 302.
63. A scholarly approach on Estonian middle class has been virtually missing, while studies of poverty, inequality, and social stratification more generally are abundant. A rare exception of the former, focusing on all three Baltic States, is Masso *et al*.
64. See also the introduction to this *EEPS* special issue. There is no space here to discuss what Amalrik has called the "middle layer" of the Soviet "triple-decker sandwich," consisting of the "middle class" or the "class of specialists" (A. Amalrik, "Will the USSR survive until 1984?" *Survey* (1969): 47–79).
65. Masso *et al*, "Is the World."
66. B. Heyns, "Emerging Inequalities in Central and Eastern Europe," *Annual Review of Sociology* 31 (2005): 174.
67. Masso *et al*, "Is the World," 63.

68. Their share among all marathon runners has more than doubled since the turn of the millennium, growing from 16.2 percent in 2000 to 33.7 percent in 2017. Runners in their forties completed 39.7 percent of all marathons run by Estonian runners in 2017 (compared to 16.6 percent in 2000, for example).
69. Smith, "British," 198.